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ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL STATEMENT OF THE BUSSEY INSTITUTION BUILDING

The Bussey Institution, at the edge of Arnold Arboretum, is one of the last remnants of a particular style of life in nineteenth century Boston. It symbolizes much of the topographical, architectural and social history of the era - especially nineteenth century philanthropic attitudes.

BACKGROUND OF THE SETTING

What is now known as Jamaica Plain was in the seventeenth century part of "West Roxbury." Situated between Roxbury on the northeast and Dedham on the southwest, it was an area of fertile farmlands which supplied Boston with most of its fruits and produce. The roadway which linked Roxbury and Dedham was "Centre St." It followed a circuitous route skimming the edges of steep stone ledges. At one such barrier, a minor route, "South St.", branched off in the opposite direction from Centre St. However, it gradually shifted in a ninety degree angle and eventually the greatest length of South St. ran parallel to Centre St.

The land bounded by Centre and South Streets became, in the eighteenth century, the "unsurpassed" suburban estates of the Cabots, the Lowells, the Lymans, and the Lees. Only one estate maintained its seventeenth century size and owner; the Weld Farm, 365 acres southwest of the above estates, was founded in 1641 by Captain Joseph Weld. The farm, known for its russet apples and cider, stayed in the Weld family until the mid-nineteenth century.

ORIGINS OF THE BUSSEY INSTITUTION

Benjamin Bussey was among those who eventually bought Weld Farm property. The son of a merchant mariner, Bussey lived in Canton until the Revolutionary War when he served as a quartermaster with the militia. After the battles of Saratoga and Bemus Heights, he retired to Dedham and became a very successful silversmith. In 1806 Bussey began to acquire property in West Roxbury. By 1815 he had accumulated over 200 acres. The estate known as "Woodland Hills" flourished with orchards of all species. Bussey and his family spent the remainder of his life in the mansion on the lovely Woodland Hills.

Upon his death in 1842, Bussey bequeathed approximately 250 acres of land to Harvard College for the establishment of a school of "practical agriculture, useful and ornamental gardening, botany," etc. This gift was to be granted only if Bussey's widow and grand-daughters chose not to remain at Woodland Hills. They waived their rights to the family estate which was fortunate for Boston since the majority of this gift is now Arnold Arboretum. In his will, Bussey also provided the funds to obtain additional acreage for the school. This property adjoined the estate - fifteen acres of the Weld Farm and sixty acres of the Whitney Estate.

In addition to providing for the school property, the charitable Bussey arranged for a school building. In his will, he described the building which would later be known as the "Bussey Institution." Bussey specified the site for the school house to be the "Plain-field", an area to the east of his farm's garden and bounded on the south by the road running from Woodland Hill to Boston. The edifice was to be "not less than ten rods" from the road and the exterior walls were to be "built of stone in blocks, not hammered, or to be similar to the front wall of the (masonic temple)." He charged the trustees of his estate with the responsibility of overseeing the design and construction "with proper regard to durability and beauty, so as best to secure the comfort and convenience of the inmates."

THE ARCHITECTS

The trustees chose as architects Robert S. Peabody and John G. Stearns, Jr. The two had only recently joined in partnership, and their business went well. However, not until the 1886 death of the well-known architect H. H. Richardson did Peabody and Stearns receive due merit. After this critics took note of their major commissions. Among the best known are the Back Bay, Queen Anne style townhouses; "Shamrock Cliff" and other rural residences of Newport; "Kraggsyde" at Manchester-by-the-Sea; the Exchange Building in Boston; and the R. H. White Warehouse Store in Boston. (The impact of the White Warehouse on architectural style was felt even by Louis Sullivan in Chicago.) These critics found the Peabody and Stearns works filled with imagination, energy and a unique sense of the picturesque, sometimes called the "Peabody touch."

DESCRIPTION OF THE BUILDING

Since the successful partnership began in 1870 and the Bussey Institution was designed and built in 1870-71, some believe the school building to be the first executed work of Peabody and Stearns.

The building is Victorian Gothic in style. The interplay of roofs which are both steeply pitched gables and hipped create a mysterious medieval character. However, features of the site were not forsaken for style. Natural Roxbury pudding-stone, the primary building material, and the trim of brownstone and wood complemented the rural setting. The variation and detailing - contrasting bands of colored slate and bronze and iron flashing and grillework on the roof - were placed high upon the building. To balance this intricacy, a glassed-over, lean-to greenhouse occupied a lower level of the left front. The opposing wing with its hipped roof and small gabled dormers also created visual interest on the lower part of the building. Certainly this building full satisfied the conditions of the Bussey bequest for durability and beauty.

As the first work of prominent contributors to American architecture, the Bussey Institution foretold what would be notable Peabody and Stearns characteristics. The asymmetrical design and medieval style would appear over and over, as would Peabody's innate sensitivity to a site's subtle features. The only characteristic conspicuously absent is the tower, a trademark of later Peabody and Stearns commissions. However, the strong vertical pull of the roofs and their detailing suggest the tower concept was forthcoming. The Bussey Institution marks a significant point in the careers of Robert Peabody and John Stearns, Jr. and gives insight into the development of these architects who ultimately were to exert great force on their profession.

Yet, to appreciate the Bussey Institution one does not need to understand the place of this building in architectural history. The present building of the (state) Department of Public Health yields a rich architectural experience, which brings the modern viewer closer to the romance and grand manner of nineteenth century Boston.

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